

September 1, 2016

The Honorable Robert A. McDonald
Department of Veterans Affairs
810 Vermont Avenue NW
Washington, DC 20420

Dear Secretary McDonald:

It has been brought to my attention by a whistleblower that the Edward Hines, Jr. Veterans Affairs Hospital has failed to treat the remains of unclaimed and indigent veterans with dignity and ensured burial within a reasonable amount of time. Specifically, whistleblowers report there are currently two veterans who have been left in the Hines morgue for over a month. The graphic details of what happens to these remains without timely post mortem care is sickening and shameful. Your support to uncover the truth and protection for the employees who came forward on behalf of veterans is imperative.

The Veterans Health Administration Handbook 1601B.04 states that "if a Veteran dies ... at a VA facility under authorized admission ... and the Veteran's remains are unclaimed, the facility Director will request funeral and burial services to be procured through a contract."

I am asking, on behalf of all veterans at Hines VA, if a service contract with an established funeral home or two would allow for the timely transport of unclaimed or indigent veterans' remains to be prepared for burial and laid to rest. Whistleblowers also suggest the service relationships between Hines VA and some local funeral homes no longer exist because of the health risk posed by the extreme decomposition of remains after being stored for so long without post mortem care.

Finally, I would like information on the federal funds made available by the annual Military Construction and Veterans Affairs appropriations bill for the seamless transfer of unclaimed or indigent veterans' remains to local funeral homes. Ignoring the law or misusing funds is a clear disregard to the VA's standard operation procedure and possibly illegal.

Every hero who serves in our US Armed Forces deserves a dignified final farewell from a grateful nation. To learn these veterans remains have been sitting in the morgue for over a month, sometimes longer, without proper post mortem care, is unacceptable and unjustifiable.

Just as no service member is ever left behind on the battlefield, no veteran should ever be left behind in morgue.

Therefore I ask for your immediate attention to correct this disgrace, demand that the two veterans who are currently in the morgue promptly receive a proper and respectful burial, and take appropriate disciplinary action against the person or persons responsible for letting this happen. I also ask that you launch a review of VA hospitals across the country to ensure that this mistreatment of our heroes' remains is not happening elsewhere.

Thank you for your immediate attention to this matter. I look forward to hearing from you.

Sincerely,



Mark Kirk
United States Senator